SPORT

ATP announces reduction in obligatory events

PARIS: The ATP on Thursday announced a slight compromise with disgruntled players by reducing the number of obligatory tournaments they must play each year in an ever more packed schedule.

Wimbledon champion Jannik Sinner and world number one Carlos Alacaraz are amongst the top male players to have complained about the heavy workload, with an increasing number of players succumbing to injury and burn-out.

The ATP said it was reducing the number of ATP 500 events players must take part in each year from five to four, and also cutting back the maximum number of events used to calculate ranking points, from 19 to 18.

The ATP said this was done "to create more scheduling flexibility".

Top 30 ATP players are obliged, unless injured, to compete in the four Grand Slams, the nine Masters 1000 tournaments, the ATP Finals (if they qualify) and four ATP 500 events.

Alcaraz played 80 matches in 2025, winning 71 of them, while Sinner played 79 matches in both 2023 and 2024, when he won 73 of those.

Another compromise announced by the ATP to alleviate the pressure on players is that anyone who pulls out of an ongoing tournament due to the birth or adoption of a child will now keep the ranking points they have gained up until then, meaning they would not have to play in an extra tournament to gain ranking points for the ATP Finals.

While players have complained about packed schedules, some have nonetheless chosen to take part in lucrative exhibition matches when they could be resting.

The ATP also announced an expansion of the use of video review technology to ATP 500 events in 2026 and ATP 250 events in 2027.

"A new Heat Rule is being implemented across ATP events, with clear protocols to suspend or adjust play in extreme conditions," the ATP said in its statement.—AFP

Belgium make semis

SYDNEY: Zizou Bergs stunned world number 18 Jakub Mensik and Elise Mertens outplayed Barbora Krejcikova as Belgium beat the Czech Republic 2-0 in the United Cup quarter-finals on Thursday to set up a last-four clash with Switzerland.

Mensik struggled with double faults in the second set as Bergs won 6-2, 7-6(4), before Mertens beat Krejcikova 5-7, 6-1, 7-5 to seal the tie.

Bergs, ranked 42nd in the world, landed four aces as he took the first set in 31 minutes, and kept his cool through a tense second-set tiebreak to clinch his second straight win over a top-20-ranked opponent, having beaten Canadian world number five Felix Auger-Aliassime in the group stage.

"You're so close, you're playing big points. I got tight, I go backwards, I play defensive. So it was a very big struggle in the end. I'm so happy for myself and the team," Bergs said.

Mertens wore down two-time Grand Slam winner Krejcikova who committed seven double faults in the third set.

Australia face Poland on Friday for a place in Saturday's first semi-final against the United States.—Reuters

LONDON: Fulham's Harry Wilson (second L) celebrates after scoring during the Premier League match against Chelsea at Craven Cottage.—Reuters

Arsenal get title boost as City, Villa both falter

LONDON: Arsenal's Premier League title prospects were enhanced without them even kicking a ball on Wednesday as their closest challengers Manchester City and Aston Villa both dropped points.

Erling Haaland scored his 150th goal for City as he put them in front against Brighton and Hove Albion from the penalty spot but Kaoru Mitoma equalised for the visitors on the hour with the game finishing 1-1.

It was the third successive draw for stuttering City who were held by Sunderland on New Year's Day and by Chelsea at the weekend when they also conceded an equalizer.

"The result is the result. I'm not a person who believes what we have done isn't fair," City manager Pep Guardiola said.

Second-placed City remain five points behind Arsenal who can stretch the lead to eight if they win their game in hand against Liverpool.

Third-placed Villa are also five behind after they could only draw 0-0 in a dour contest at Crystal Palace, Ollie Watkins going closest for Villa with a late effort against the woodwork.

Chelsea's new manager Liam Rosenior watched on in the stands at Craven Cottage as his new club went down 2-1 at Fulham after having Marc Cucurella sent off midway through the first half.

Raul Jimenez gave Fulham the lead and although Liam Delap equalised for the visitors, Harry Wilson sealed the points for Fulham. Defeat left Chelsea down in eighth place.

Two days after sacking manager Ruben Amorim, Manchester United could only draw 2-2 at 19th-placed Burnley.

Benjamin Sesko scored twice for United, doubling his tally for the season, but it was not enough to give caretaker manager Darren Fletcher a win as Jaidon Anthony's equaliser earned Burnley a point. United slipped to seventh.

"For me the fact we have drawn is a massive disappointment," Fletcher told the BBC. "If you look at the context of the game, the chances we created, goalline clearances, a disallowed goal, 30 shots, lots of attacking play. "We created more than enough to win the game so obviously it is disappointing when you only come away with a point."

Brentford moved into fifth spot as Brazilian striker Igor Thiago followed up his hat-trick at the weekend against Everton with two goals in a 3-0 home victory over Sunderland to take his league tally for the season to 16.

"He's a complete centre forward," said Brentford manager Keith Andrews. "I wouldn't be swapping him for anybody."

Newcastle United trailed three times in a thriller at home to Leeds United but emerged with an astonishing 4-3 victory to move into the top six thanks to a last-gasp goal by Harvey Barnes after Bruno Guimaraes had equalised for the hosts from the penalty spot in the 91st minute.

Barnes's goal arrived in the 102nd minute, the latest winning goal in Premier League history.

The home fans chanted for former manager Kevin Keegan as the club posted the words "We're all with you King Kev" on the big screen.

The club earlier shared a statement from Keegan's family announcing the ex-England boss had been diagnosed with cancer.

Bottom club Wolverhampton Wanderers' recent upturn continued with a 1-1 draw at Everton.

Everton ended the game with nine men after Michael Keane, who scored their goal, and Jack Grealish were both sent off late on -- Keane for an apparent hair pull on Tolu Arokodare.

'NO MAN DESERVES IT MORE'

Antoine Semenyo gave Bournemouth fans a farewell gift before his expected move to Manchester City, scoring in stoppage time to give his side a 3-2 victory at home against Tottenham Hotspur, his side's first win in 12 league games. "That was the type of stuff you write in movies and no man deserves it more than him," Marcus Tavernier said of his soon-to-be former team mate.

Defeat heaps the pressure on Spurs boss Thomas Frank, who has overseen just two wins in his past 12 Premier League matches during his first season at the London club.

"It's extremely painful to be on the Tottenham side after the game," the Dane told the BBC. "We put everything into the game."

Semenyo illustrated just why City are prepared to pay 65 million pounds ($87.46 million) for his services with a curling shot past Guglielmo Vicario sparking wild celebrations.

City have won the title six times in the last eight seasons but their hopes of reclaiming it after being dethroned by Liverpool last season are beginning to look forlorn.

They produced a lacklustre attacking display against Brighton but Haaland's penalty, after a foul by Diego Gomez on Jeremy Doku, looked like earning them a victory that would have put some pressure on leaders Arsenal.

But Brighton struck back as Mitoma guided in an equaliser from the edge of the penalty area.

Haaland should have won it for City late on, but fired a shot straight at Brighton keeper Bart Verbruggen.

To make matters worse for City, Guardiola said Savinho will be out for two months with an injury, adding to an absentee list that also includes defenders Ruben Dias, Josko Gvardiol and John Stones.

"I love a lot the way we played, we did many good things, but we don't score goals," Guardiola said. "There are too many clear chances."—Agencies

Barca thump Bilbao to reach Spanish Super Cup final

JEDDAH: Fermin Lopez scored one goal and laid on two more as Barcelona tore through Athletic Bilbao to record a 5-0 victory in their Spanish Super Cup semi-final played in Saudi Arabia on Wednesday, extending the Catalans winning run to nine matches.

Raphinha scored twice while Ferran Torres and Roony Bardghji were also on target in a dominant display as Barcelona led 4-0 at halftime and now await the winner of the second semi-final between Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid.

Hansi Flick began with teenage star Lamine Yamal on the bench but his team was still able to ease to a comfortable victory at the King Abdullah Sports City stadium.

The La Liga leaders have now won nine matches in a row across all competitions and Athletic, enduring a difficult season, were ripped to shreds.

Last season Barca went on to win La Liga and the Copa del Rey after Flick's side won the Spanish Super Cup for the first trophy of the German's reign and the coach had said he wanted to use the competition as a springboard for more success again.

ATHLETIC Bilbao's Aitor Paredes (R) vies for the ball with Ferran Torres of Barcelona during the Spanish Super Cup semi-final at the King Abdullah Sports City.—AFP

"It's us who make games easy or hard — when we're playing well, doing things right, defending well, attacking well, the game is easier," Raphinha told Movistar.

Barca were ahead in the 22nd minute through Torres, taking an awkward pass that appeared to be a shot gone wrong from Fermin, and his fine first touch allowed him to fire into the back of the net from seven yards.

It was 2-0 on the half-hour mark when Raphinha reached the byline and his low cross to the middle of the penalty box was brilliantly turned into the net by Fermin.

Fermin then made it a hat-trick of goal contributions when he turned provider again for Bardghji on 34 minutes, though it was a simple pass into the latter, who twisted and turned in the box before firing low into the net.

Barca were rampant at this stage and they added a fourth through Raphinha when he burst into the box and blasted into the roof of the net.

The Brazilian netted his second on 52 minutes as Bilbao failed to clear a ball into the penalty area, and Raphinha fired home a left-footed shot.

"We have to say sorry to the fans who came here, we were not up to the level today, there's nothing else we can do than say sorry," said Athletic captain Inaki Williams.—Agencies

Inter extend Serie A lead at Parma after Napoli slip

MILAN: Inter Milan moved four points clear at the top of Serie A on Wednesday after winning 2-0 at Parma while rivals Napoli battled to a 2-2 home draw with Hellas Verona.

Federico Dimarco scored the opening goal just before half-time at a foggy Stadio Ennio Tardini before Marcus Thuram netted in stoppage time to give Inter a sixth straight league win and a handy advantage on third-placed Napoli.

Inter will hold top spot until at least the weekend, when Cristian Chivu's team will host the champions in a Scudetto showdown at the San Siro.

But their lead could be cut back to a point on Thursday if AC Milan, who sit second and are level on 38 points with Napoli, win their game in hand against struggling Genoa.

"Today it was important to win and that's what we did, now we can start thinking about Sunday's match," said Dimarco to DAZN.

Inter could have won more easily as Pio Esposito, who started in place of Thuram in view of Sunday's clash with Napoli, hit the crossbar in the 29th minute, while Parma old boy Ange-Yoan Bonny had a late goal ruled out for handball.

But it was Petar Sucic who wasted the best opportunity of the night midway through the second half when he somehow shot wide when sent clean through by Lautaro Martinez.

In the end it didn't matter and Inter now have a healthy cushion between themselves and Napoli, who had to fight back from two goals down at half-time to squeak a draw in Naples.

Giovanni Di Lorenzo swept home a brilliant leveller with eight minutes remaining to grab a point after Scott McTominay's header early in the second half started the fightback.

"The positive thing is that we came back from going two goals behind but it's not the right result... we wanted to win our first match of 2026 in front of our fans," said Di Lorenzo to DAZN. "I'm pleased for myself for the goal but it's not enough."

Inter's win has piled pressure on Napoli, especially given the continued injury crisis affecting Antonio Conte's squad.

Andre-Frank Anguissa and Romelu Lukaku were in the stands while star summer signing Kevin De Bruyne is still absent, with niggling injuries causing problems almost every match.

McTominay's third league goal of the season sparked an onslaught on the Verona goal but Rasmus Hojlund was denied a 72nd-minute equaliser when he was penalised for handball following a VAR check.

After Amir Rrahmani also had a goal chalked off for offside, skipper Di Lorenzo salvaged something from the match and maintained Napoli's unbeaten home record this season.

Atalanta continued their revival under Raffaele Palladino with a 2-0 win at Bologna, with Nikola Krstovic bagging both goals after starting in place of the injured Gianluca Scamacca.

Krstovic netted smart low finishes in each half to push Atalanta above Bologna into seventh, albeit eight points behind Juventus who sit fourth in the last Champions League spot.

While Atalanta look like a new team, Bologna sit eighth and are slipping down the table after failing to win since the end of November, although they have a game in hand due to their participation in the Italian Super Cup in Saudi Arabia.

Fiorentina were denied a second win of the season by Pedro's stoppage-time penalty in a thrilling 2-2 draw at Lazio and are two points behind Genoa who sit just outside the relegation zone.—AFP

PARMA: Inter Milan's Federico Dimarco takes a corner kick during the Serie A match against Parma at the Stadio Ennio Tardini.—Reuters

National U-21 snooker starts

KARACHI: Sixteen matches were played on the opening day of the 15th edition of the National Junior U-21 Snooker Championship here at the Jahangir Khan Sports Complex on Thursday.

Sixteen players from across the country, divided into four groups, are featuring in the three-day event features.

Results:

Mohammad Adil (KP) bt Rehan Ali (Sindh) 3-0 (73-11, 54-51, 43-42); Mohammad Aqib (Punjab) bt Sheikh Mohammad Muzammil (Islamabad) 3-1 (10-44, 52-51, 51-33, 63-42); Mohsin Kamal (Punjab) bt S. Zain Zadi (Sindh) 3-1 (57-15, 55-06, 39-55, 54-08); Ali Raza (Balochistan) bt Ubaidullah Jan (KP) 3-2 (02-68, 40-59, 65-27, 57-35, 55-32); Mohammad Farhan (Punjab) bt Malik Muzammil (KP) 3-0 (58-34, 64-11, 75-26); Barjees Khan (Islamabad) bt Dheeraj Kumar (Sindh) 3-1 (27-55, 60-13, 63-33, 64-36); Jahanzaib Jahangir (Balochistan) bt Ayan Ali (Sindh) 3-1 (66-44, 39-27, 72-25, 76-38); Shahzaib Rafique (KP) bt Aliyan Zamin (Punjab) 3-1 (50-10, 53-39, 50-65, 73-42); Rehan Ali (Sindh) bt Mohammad Aqib (Punjab) 3-1 (24-55, 65-38, 81-52, 65-30); Sheikh M. Muzammil (Islamabad) bt Mohammad Adil (KP) 3-0 (86-29, 48-32, 72-36); Mohsin Kamal (Punjab) bt Ubaidullah Jan (KP) 3-2 (61-44, 33-69, 38-48, 56-33, 58-56); Ali Raza (Balochistan) bt S. Zain Zadi (Sindh) 3-2 (33-57, 60-16, 43-54, 59-18, 70-36); Dheeraj Kumar (Sindh) bt Malik Muzammil (KP) 3-2 (21-54, 51-48, 46-81, 50-38, 86-47); Mohammad Farhan (Punjab) bt Barjees Khan (Islamabad) 3-0 (86-23, 74-13, 57-17); Shahzaib Rafique (KP) bt Jahanzaib Jahangir (Balochistan) 3-2 (17-54, 2-68, 92-80, 56-13, 68-35); Ayan Ali (Sindh) bt Aliyan Zamin (Punjab) 3-1 (64-58, 50-18, 12-68, 60-37).--Sports Reporter

Sabalenka impresses again in Brisbane, vows more to come

BRISBANE: World number one Aryna Sabalenka said she still had room for improvement after a second dominant win in the Brisbane International on Thursday.

Sabalenka was pushed at times by 36-year-old Sorana Cirstea but was never really troubled by the Romanian as she notched a 6-3, 6-3 win to reach the quarter-finals of the season-opening tournament.

The Belarusian will next play Madison Keys, the American who beat her in last year's Australian Open final.

Keys came back from a set and a break down to overcome Russia's Diana Shnaider in a three-hour marathon 6-7 (5/7), 7-6 (7/5), 7-6 (7/4).

There was a shock in the last of the night's matches when Ukraine's Marta Kostyuk stunned world number three Amanda Anisimova 6-4, 6-3 in a high-quality match on centre court.

Sabalenka said she aimed to get better as she targets a third Australian Open title in four years when the first Grand Slam of the year begins in Melbourne on Jan 18.

"I think there is always room to improve, and I'm definitely not at my peak," Sabalenka said. "Of course I prefer to win every match 6-0, 6-0, like everyone probably prefers, but at the end of the day you only get better when someone pushes you and you have to deal with moments under pressure."

Sabalenka said tournaments such as Brisbane, which features seven of the top 10 women, were perfect preparation for a Grand Slam.

"I think it's important to have quality matches before heading to the big event, just so you're preparing yourself mentally for fights, for battles," she said.

"And playing against top players is definitely a huge help heading into the Grand Slam tournament."

Keys, who won her first Grand Slam title in Melbourne over Sabalenka, was in trouble against 21-year-old Shnaider but was able to stay in the contest and edge ahead in the last two tiebreaks.

"That had a little bit of everything — it's good to start the year with a little bit of drama, so I'm glad we got that out of the way," Keys said.

Kostyuk played the match of her life to down Anisimova, who reached the finals of Wimbledon and the US Open in 2025.

"I practised with Amanda a week ago and she absolutely destroyed me," Kostyuk said.

"I think I played really, really good. I had an amazing preparation and tactically I think I played really good."

Former Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina reached the quarter-finals with a 6-3, 6-2 win over Spain's Paula Badosa.

World number five Rybakina took control at 3-3 in the first set, winning nine of the next 11 games to seal victory.

Fourth seed Jessica Pegula also came back from a set down beat Ukraine's Dayana Yastremska 5-7, 6-2, 6-3.—AFP